



Preußische Gesellschaft Berlin-Brandenburg e.V.

## **Prussia and its Singular Historical Significance**

The Prussia year 2001 seeks to commemorate Prussia in a special way by recognizing it as the heir to our German culture and history. As a Prussian society, we have fittingly paid due respect to the 18<sup>th</sup> of January, the day on which some 300 years ago Prussia became a royal kingdom with the crowning of Frederick I, and the reason behind this year's commemoration of Prussia.

Nonetheless when speaking of significant historical dates, numerous questions naturally come to the fore. In this case the perpetually recurring question as to when precisely the history of Prussia began. Prussia did not suddenly and unexpectedly come into being on January 18<sup>th</sup> 1701. On the contrary, by this time it possessed a long history.

Indeed, the even more challenging question is also posed regarding when and how Prussia came to end within this context. The 18<sup>th</sup> of January was, 170 years after the crowning of the king, at once also the day of the founding of the German

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Empire. **What role did January 18, 1871 play for the history of the Kingdom of Prussia?**

A handful of questions which have long been answered with numerous and often varying explanations. My intention is not to contribute to this multitude. Rather, I would like to direct your attention to the singular historical significance of Prussia, which even in light of Prussia 2001, where Prussia is the object of well-rounded discussion and representation, it nevertheless remains in the background. With this, a few of the aforementioned questions can be answered independently.

Prussia's singular historical significance consists in the role it played in the fate and history of Germany.

At its apex, namely the **classical period of the era of Frederick the Great**, Prussia had risen to the status of one of the great powers of Europe. Perhaps of greater import was Prussia's emergence as a modern state in educational and cultural terms. On June 1, 1794, the general code of Prussia law, which first surfaced under the auspices of Frederick the Great and became official under his successor, made Prussia a sovereign state to be governed under rule of law.

After its clash with Napoleon and its defeat in 1806, or more precisely its total dissolution, the cautious internal reforms

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which had been previously begun were executed with breathtaking speed. The most important of which being, the reorganization of the administrative state, the emancipation of the peasants, the self-administration of the state, new trade regulations, a comprehensive military reorganization, the civil parity of treatment for Jews, and a reform of the founding of universities, including Berlin's University in 1810. With this, Prussia fulfilled the preconditions for its struggle for liberation against Napoleon. During this period, **namely the Stein-Hardenbergian reforms and the 1813-14 war** for liberation, the interests of Germany and Prussia coincided, where Prussians thought in German terms. In the western and southern territories, most German patriots associated German affairs with those of Prussia.

These fundamentals made it possible for Prussia, the smallest of the European great powers, to make the greatest and most significant contribution in overcoming Napoleon during the war for liberation between 1813 and 1815. Had it not been for the events of January 18, 1871, the kingdom of Prussia would not have succeeded in making its mark within historical context. Indeed, this date proves ambiguous. It is widely acknowledged that the king and first German Kaiser Wilhelm I, was resistant

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to recognizing January 18, 1871 as the official date of the Kaiser's proclamation. It bothered him that the annual celebrations for the founding of the order of the black nobility, would thereby be cancelled. Moreover, he had a presentiment that with the creation of the German Empire as a self sufficient European power would come to an end. What followed was the progressive dissolution of Prussia's status as a great power from 1871 onwards, with the German Empire appropriating the role of Europe's centre of political influence. The state of Prussia had to adapt itself to a new position, namely acceptance of the status of a single German federal state alongside others (Bavaria, Saxony, and Württemberg to name only a few of the largest) which together constituted the German Empire.

Here, although Prussia retained the leading status, in reality this carried little weight. Moreover with time, the leadership of the Empire found expression in the offices of the Kaiser, Reichstag, Bundestag, Reichskanzler, the Empire's civil servantry, etc... - all the institutions which embodied the German Empire from within and without. As an independently functioning European power, Prussia "dawned upon Germany", to borrow an expression from 1848. On the one hand, lie the

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events of January 1871 at the palace of Versailles as brilliantly depicted by the painter Anton von Werner, marking the end of Prussia's sovereignty. The other side of the coin acquires its meaning from the **18<sup>th</sup> of January 1871** in its more general significance for Germany. **This date marks the founding of the German national state**, the successor for which is known as the German Federal Republic. How did it come to pass as the German Republic was first founded in the previous century? Its neighbouring states existed much longer as modern nations, with England, Spain, and France emerging at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the Scandinavian states existing since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and Russia since the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

A simplified answer can be given. The German nation first emerged out of the old German Empire as it did earlier from the medieval Holy Roman Empire and remained in existence until 1806, thus preventing the development of a modern state. The inception of the most varying of reforms had failed since the attempts made by the Stauffer-Kaiser. At the latest, due to the Thirty Years War, the German Empire lost its last opportunity to establish a state, which was taking place in France, England, and even Russia. Around 1700, the period in which we are interested, the Empire was still a loose alliance of

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significantly more than one and a half thousand large, small, and miniscule state organizations. Launched through the Congress of Vienna in 1815, the German Federation was endowed with merely a loose sovereign construction. Here, the fact that the Kings of England, Denmark and the Netherlands simultaneously possessed full voting rights on par with the German princes can be discerned.

The Federation's legislative organ was the Bundestag, a legation Congress of the member states under the Austrian presidency. Neither the execution of a common foreign policy, nor the creation of an effective military protectorate, or indeed a common economic policy numbered among its tasks. It saw itself merely responsible for the maintenance of the status quo.

There was not a trace of national unity, as currency, economic life, law, administration, and the military remained heterogeneous, where only limitations on travel across borders existed with customs barriers being erected. This configuration made a mockery of German attempts at unity at a time when Great Britain and France has already developed into industrial nations.

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Indeed, the question arises as to why the old Empire was incapable of reform. Ultimately, it was not able to resolve the contradictions inherent in its medieval organization, which was on the hand enforced by a contingent of wealthy officials including the Dukes, Princes, Counts, and persons of rank, while the highest position of the Kaiser was tied to conditions which translated in a loss of real substance of the upper echelon's power. The Kaiser merely attempted to safeguard his authority via his territorial command.

Since the 15<sup>th</sup> Century, the Habsburg Dynasty knew how to preserve the honour of the Kaiser by means of adept politics, almost as if it were a significant possession. Its main interest also consisted in the consolidation and enlargement of its own lands, which all in all extended from the Netherlands and northern Germany, the heart of Austria and Hungary up to Belgrade, and from Bohemia to Northern Italy. Alongside France, England and Russia, the Austrian Dynasty steadily became accustomed to its role and rank as a European great power. Indeed, it had to be emphasized that Austria played a respectable role in South eastern Europe. The honour of the Kaiser and the Roman Empire itself were nonetheless merely additional reasons for the Viennese Court's enforcement

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of its own state interests, without simultaneously assuming responsibility for the corresponding duties such as the protection and the maintenance of the Empire. This should not be interpreted as an attempt to place blame upon the Habsburgs, as no one is at fault for this development. The evolution of Poland's Royal Empire proceeded in a similar fashion, which also unable to reorganize the elective monarchy, perished in the form of a hereditary monarchy. Here, as in the Austrian case, a single solution could be resorted to. A modern state structure in the womb, so to speak of the old unreformable bankrupt estate.

This ultimate succeeded in Germany. The rise of Prussia was an alternative to the paralysis of the old imperial body. In appropriating almost two thirds of non-Austrian German lands, Prussia secured the possibility of founding an empire without Austria by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the so called smaller Germany solution. To be explicit, without the formation of this Empire by Russia, there would have been no Germany. Today, this thesis is the object of dispute as many are weary of acknowledging Prussia this role. Indeed, the most varying attempts at unity are called to bear, including various transformation movements before March, the Revolution of 1848,

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the Paulskirche, and the federal reforms attempts remained without any practical implications.

The tragedy can be clearly discerned in the national meeting of the imperial constitution warrants particular attentions, where the best minds came together and noble attempts were made within the context of a spectrum of effective political affiliations, who shouldering a great responsibility, sought to find a solution. They failed due to the contradictions and obstacles of the historically conditioned reality of the time. **The single successful path, was the one carved out under Prussia's Prime Minister Otto von Bismarck.**

**#What this solution made possible and what is often forgotten today, is so to speak, the squaring of the circle, and Bismarck's masterly achievement.** Rather than doing away with the other German princes and their principalities, he incorporated them as a constructive element in the foundation of his empire. From the centrifugal forces which until then had hindered unity. Nonetheless, this solution bore a price, namely the voluntary capitulation of Prussia itself, that from this moment on became one with Germany. A keen observation was made by **field Marshall Helmuth Graf von Moltke** after his first view of the Empire's foundation in 187. He observed: "The

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greatest sacrifice Prussia could make is its own self capitulation".

Germany unity is Prussia's legacy. This fact is inextricably linked with the Prussia's historical significance. Indeed, the 18<sup>th</sup> of January 1701, the date of the founding act of the Royal Empire of Prussia, secures its true import on the 18<sup>th</sup> of January 1871, the culmination of the founding of a unified German state. The next obvious question would be why Prussia as opposed to say Bavaria or Saxony which lie closer in the vicinity of Austria, undertook this role.

Indeed, Prussia had arrived at a new stage of statehood, whereas Bavaria and Saxony remained German middle states. Prussia has been described as an 'artificial' state structure; a foreseeable characterization. The Brandenburgian-Prussian state that emerged was not solely the sum of its individuals components, namely the Kurmark middle German and Rhine Westphalian lands together with the Prussian duchy. In particular, East Prussia stood on a similar level as the Kurmark as a constructive of the new "Prussia". Prussia could boast highly developed cities such as the old capital and university city, Königsberg. With its overseas grain trade, its nobility, Frederick the Great's competent and reliable

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officer corps, its independent cultural life, which is manifest even today in given its long year relationship to the Hanseatic League, and the Scandinavian and Baltic states as well as Holland and England, Königsberg proved formidable. It is not without reason that Immanuel Kant felt at home here. Kant in Königsberg and Hegel in Berlin - that was Prussia!

Indeed, the Rhine Westphalian lands introduced something of their own to the Prussian state with their contrasting political structure an industry.

Prussia gradually thus spread across Germany integrating new territories and the accompanying spiritual-cultural and economic potential, until finally covering all of north and middle Germany by the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Prussian values rank not least among the decisive factors conditioning the quality of the Prussian state itself, and corresponded with the intellectual upturn in literature, science, and art of German classics leading to the Prussian reform movement and the general national exertion aimed at the war of liberation of 1813-1815.

**In eventuating Prussia's historical significance** from the perspective of German cultural history in general, Prussia 2001 can only mean:

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We are not dealing with the small time depiction of German unity, and the Prussian year is meant to provide impulses for new reflections on:

- Our German cultural history
- Our irritatingly misused German language
- Our Classic and Romantic traditions
- Our work tradition

("Workmanship was not without reason a synonym for German")

National consciousness is not abnormal, for it prevails naturally among all of our neighbours, whether the French or the Polish, the English, Italians and even the Russians. By no means is the intention one of keeping silent over, or suppressing the dishonourable side of our history. We want to accept our history in its entirety and thereby treat it seriously. This history cannot be reduced to a mere 12 years, rather spanning more than a millennium. **Accordingly, the Prussian Community wishes to achieve its objectives:**

- That Germany is conceived of as a fatherland, the serving of which is a great honour.
- Responsibility, conscientiousness, and tolerance ought to regain their high status as moral categories

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- Thrift and modesty should be considered desirable virtues.
- The fostering of German culture, the essence of Goethe and Schiller's language is also a task to be won over the attempt to prevent the freedom of the press to serve as a open field for the gratification of lesser instincts.

The Prussian year can contribute to these ends.

**Whether we Prussians have lost for good, lies in our own hands! The recollection of an ethos embodying Prussia, our state conception and its virtues as the foundation for a new way of life and work is necessary for Germans more than ever before. It lies in our power to sow the seeds for this beginning.**

PRO GLORIA ET PATRIA

Und Gott befohlen

Volker Tschapke

President

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